



# Kabul کابل



When the Taliban fled Kabul in the face of the post-9/11 US bombing campaign, they left a city wrecked by years of war. Half the city consisted of rubble and no-one could remember the last time anything new had been built. It was a city on life-support.

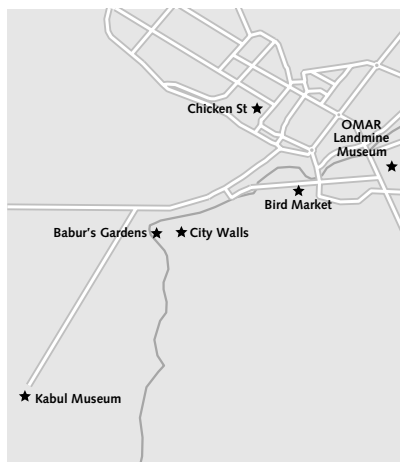
Today, Kabul seems to change on an almost daily basis. Swathes of the city have been cleared, and new buildings are quickly thrown up as if in a steroid-powered building contest. The air is thick with the sound of mobile phones. New restaurants and busy bazaars cater to the nouveau riche Afghans surfing an economic boom and the sizeable international community helping with Afghanistan's reconstruction (or just making money out of it). While there's a long way to go before Kabul is restored to its position as a travellers' haunt, there's a whiff of its old cosmopolitan self in the air.

But it's not all roses and flashy new 4WD cars. Electricity and clean water remain a distant aspiration for the majority of the population, which has doubled since the end of 2001 with returning refugees. Plenty of Kabulis still live in bombed-out buildings or worse, and beggars, war widows and street children further swell the traffic jams that clog the city. Reconstruction for the poorest has been frustratingly slow.

Kabul today is a fascinating snapshot of the birth pangs of a new nation, and a city permanently on the cusp of change. As an introduction to Afghanistan it's exciting, frustrating, inspiring and shocking in equal measure.

## HIGHLIGHTS





- Enjoy the green spaces and flowers of **Babur's Gardens** (p87), recently restored to their former glory
- Ponder the surviving exhibits at the **Kabul Museum** (p88), a frontline in Afghanistan's struggle to keep its heritage alive
- Climb above the **City Walls** (p90) for crisp air and mountain views over the city
- Visit the **OMAR Landmine Museum** (p93) to learn more about the silent killers still plaguing the country
- Haggle for carpets and lapis lazuli in **Chicken Street** (p102), home to Afghanistan's keenest souvenir sellers
- Experience the sights and smells of old Kabul at the traditional **Bird Market** (p90) of Ka Faroshi

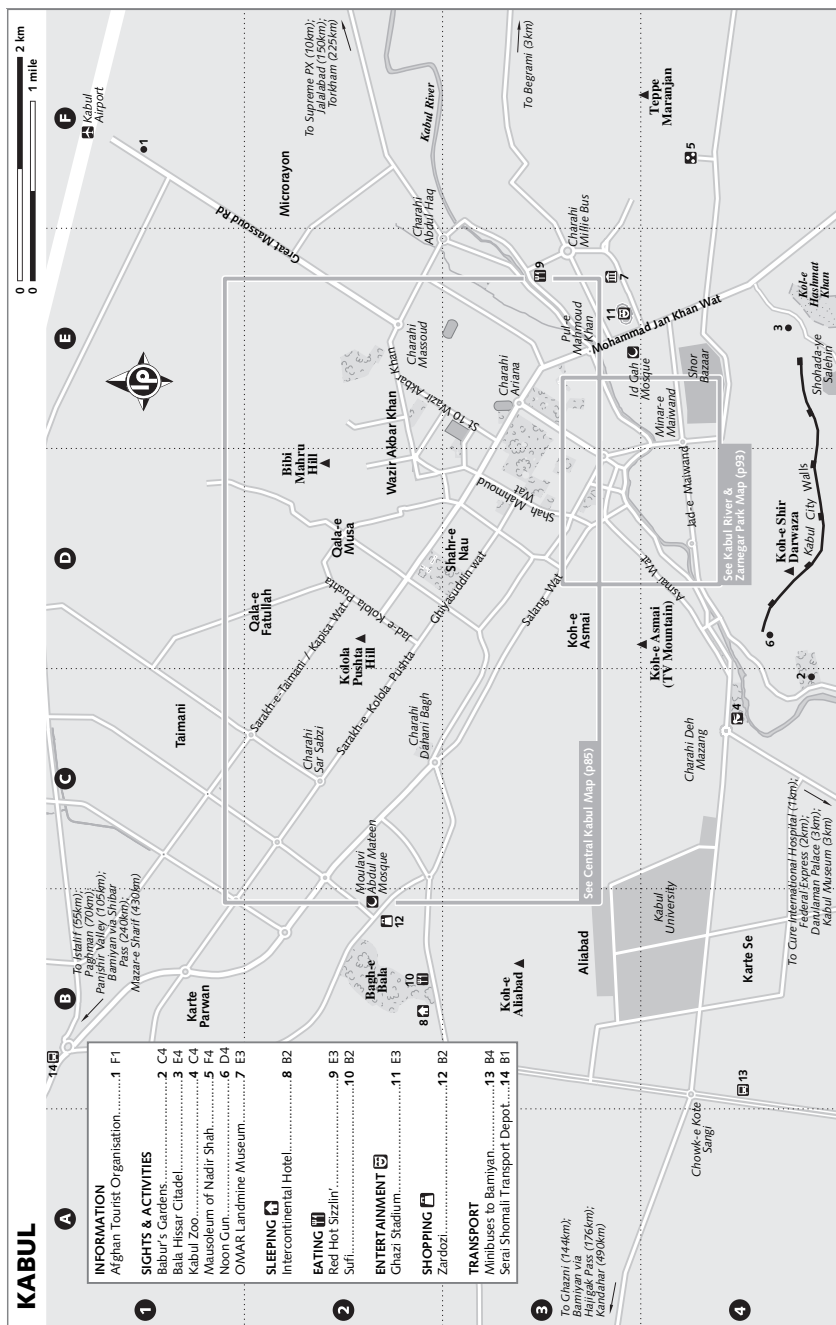


■ AREA CODE: 020

■ POPULATION: 3 MILLION (ESTIMATED)

■ ELEVATION: 1800M

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## HISTORY

Legendarily founded by Cain and Abel, Kabul is an ancient city, repeatedly fought over by all the region's great empires and religions. Known in antiquity as Kabura, it was an Achaemenid outpost 2500 years ago, later renamed Parapamisadae by the Bactrian Greeks who built a city here. In the centuries that followed, Kabul became a Buddhist city during the Kushan era, Hindu under the Indians and finally Muslim with the Arab expansion from the east. Kabul's first Afghan rulers were the Ghorids in the 12th century.

The whirlwind of destruction wreaked by Genghis Khan had largely blown itself out by the time he reached Kabul, and the city escaped the worst of the Mongol destruction. Kabul prospered under Timur in the 14th century, who even married the sister of one of Kabul's rulers, and used the city as the base for his conquest of India. In 1504 Kabul was captured by Babur, founder of the Mughal empire.

Babur loved Kabul, and had rhapsodised about its many delights. Even as his ambition drove him eastward to India he dreamed of the city, writing 'I have a longing beyond expression to return to Kabul. How can its delights ever be erased from my heart?'. His body was returned to Kabul for burial.

As Mughal interests became centred on India, Kabul's fortunes waned. A period of Safavid Persian interest was cut short by the meteoric rise to power of Ahmad Shah Durrani, who captured Kabul from his Kandahar base, forging the modern Afghan kingdom in the process. His son, Timur Shah, moved the Afghan capital to Kabul in 1772.

Kabul was never a secure throne. When Dost Mohammed became amir in the 1820s, he found himself squeezed not just by Afghan rivals, but by the British and Russian empires. Initially courted by both powers, the British eventually sent an army of occupation to Kabul in 1839, putting their own puppet on the throne. It was an early round of the Great Game that ended in disaster for the British – their resident hacked to pieces by a mob, and the Kabul garrison massacred as it tried to retreat from the city (see p32). The British sent an army of retribution to Kabul in 1842 and dynamited

## RISK ASSESSMENT

As the capital and centre of the international presence in Afghanistan, Kabul is a target for anti-government elements, and 2006 saw the first suicide bombings in the city for several years. Security is generally tight, and at the time of research Kabul was quiet but unpredictable. The threat of future attacks against targets of 'high value' remains – these potentially include Afghan and international forces, areas around ministries, the airport and Jalalabad roads. Be aware that crime is also rising in Kabul – see p87 for more information.

the medieval covered bazaar, but also allowed Dost Mohammed to slip back in to the country and quietly regain his throne.

Incredibly, the British failed to learn their lesson, and were back again in 1878 trying to impose their rule. There was another massacre of British residents and another punitive army sent to Kabul (this time it was the Bala Hissar to be destroyed). At the end of the war, Amir Abdur Rahman Khan was left master of his kingdom.

At the start of the 20th century Kabul was the focus of an ambitious modernising program under King Amanullah. The model quarter of Darulaman was built on the southwest of the city, with tree-lined avenues and a European-style palace. Kabul boomed for the next 40 years. The USA and Soviet Union competed to provide vast amounts of aid, which helped pay for the paving of the city and the opening of Kabul University. The capital became a cosmopolitan place, and welcomed tourists from around the world.

Things started to change following the Soviet occupation in 1979. On the surface Kabul continued to prosper. Women made up nearly 40% of all governmental jobs, and the city's shops were well stocked. The population largely sat out the war that raged across the country, although resistance groups increasingly infiltrated Kabul's tight defences to carry out guerrilla attacks and bombings.

If a smooth change of power was expected following the withdrawal of the Red Army in 1989, events quickly proved otherwise. The victorious mujaheddin entered

the capital in April 1992 and straight away fell into a murderous battle for control of the city. Kabul's residents slid into a nightmare.

Ahmad Shah Massoud's Tajiks nominally controlled the presidency and most of Kabul, but they were immediately attacked by the forces of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, whose preferred military tactic was the mass shelling of the city. Also jostling for power were General Dostum's Uzbeks and the Hazara militias. At different times, all fought with or against each other, but the effects of these ever-changing allegiances held little meaning for Kabul's suffering population.

The factional fighting devastated Kabul, which was divided into a patchwork of competing fiefdoms. The west and south of the city were flattened under continuous bombardment, and countless atrocities were committed against civilians. Around 50,000 Kabulis lost their lives between 1992 and 1996, and a flood of refugees left the city.

The puritan Taliban might have been welcomed as a group that could return the rule of law, but they quickly disposed of this notion. Their first action on capturing Kabul in September 1996 was the public

lynching of the former communist president Najibullah. The illiterate Taliban held a strong distrust of Kabul and its educated Persian-speaking population, and ruled the city with a harsh fist.

The Taliban's Vice and Virtue Police quickly squeezed the life out of Kabul, beating women for wearing high heels under their burqas, and imprisoning men whose beards were too short. Mullah Omar only visited Kabul once, and Afghanistan's capital effectively returned to Kandahar.

Under American bombardment, the Taliban fled Kabul in November 2001 and the Northern Alliance walked back in to power. Another army followed, this time of aid workers, contractors and returning refugees. Reconstruction continues, but it's a slow and often very frustrating process.

## CLIMATE

Kabul's mountain location gives it a generally pleasant climate. Babur thought so too, noting that 'within a day's ride from Kabul it is possible to reach a place where snow never falls, but within two hours one can go where the snow never melts.' Summer temperatures reach a maximum of around 33°C in August, although the high altitude means that nights are cold enough to war-

### THE KABUL BUBBLE

Since the fall of the Taliban, Kabul has seen a huge influx of aid money, foreign experts and returning Afghan exiles and refugees. Promises of reconstruction were made and expectations from a battered population were high. Compared to the rest of the country, Kabul was in a bubble of international attention with a booming economy. And yet in May 2006, a traffic accident involving the US army precipitated mass riots across the city, with anger vented at the international community and government alike. What went wrong?

In one respect, the expectations of Kabulis were too high. Kabul's infrastructure was not only shattered by war, but was originally designed for a much smaller city. Many refugees chose to return to the capital to seek work, rather than their home province, placing a massive burden on the city.

At the same time, many international organisations have proved ineffective at delivering services, either duplicating each other's work or inadequately consulting with locals on implementing projects. Of the scores of organisations that flooded into Kabul in 2002, many had little Afghan experience, and spent a lot of money on start-up costs or just reinventing the wheel. Landlords were quick to capitalise by hiking up their rents – a house in Wazir Akbar Khan costing US\$200 a month in September 2001 was US\$3000 six months later. With the white Landcruisers favoured by many NGOs such a visible symbol of the international presence, they have made an easy target for mullahs and politicians. The MP and former planning minister Bashar Dost created shockwaves when he called for the majority of international NGOs to be closed down, with many others agreeing with the Afghan proverb that derided them as 'cows that drink their own milk'.

The expat lifestyle has also been the target of popular ire. The free availability of alcohol to foreigners and the many Chinese restaurants that had opened purely as fronts for brothels were

rant wearing an extra layer and a blanket on your bed. Temperatures drop to just below freezing between December and February, when there can be heavy snow. Heavy rain and snowmelt can cause problems for Kabul's creaking infrastructure, and thick dust turns quickly to mud.

One drawback to Kabul's mountain-fringed location is that dust and pollution is easily trapped in the atmosphere, reducing the air quality considerably.

## ORIENTATION

Kabul sits in a plain ringed by the mountains of the Hindu Kush at an elevation of 1800m.

Little remains of Kabul's old city. The mountains of Koh-e Shir Darwaza run south along the city, topped by the old city walls, and leading in the east to the royal citadel of Bala Hissar. The mountains of Koh-e Asmai (popularly known as TV Mountain) and Koh-e Aliabad loom in from the north, pinching Kabul in two.

The Kabul River flows between this gap in the mountains, and further divides the city. To the north is Shahr-e Nau (New City), centred on its eponymous park and Pashtunistan Sq (Charahi Pashtunistan). Near the edge of the park are the new glass landmark

### KABUL'S STREET NAMES

Many Kabulis don't know the names of streets, and many addresses are given only relative to a major road or landmark. Formal street-naming plans have been mooted, but have been mired in controversy – many Kabulis have found the renaming of Great Masoud Rd in particular poor taste, given the destruction of Kabul by the mujaheddin.

*Charahi* (crossroads) are commonly used as landmarks, so it's useful to know the names of the major junctions when asking directions or catching a taxi.

buildings of the (blue) Kabul Business Centre and the (green) Kabul City Centre. East of this is the prosperous Wazir Akbar Khan district, home to many embassies.

The bustle of the city increases the closer you get to the river. Kabul's commercial heart beats at Mandayi Market around Pul-e Khishti Bridge, and Jad-e Maiwand, the most traditional areas of the city. Swathes of Jad-e Maiwand were flattened during the civil war, making it a popular subject for photojournalists. Unlike much of Kabul, it remains largely untouched by the recent pell-mell development.

among the first subjects of attention from the new Afghan parliament. Western journalists have hardly been able to resist either, finding easy stories amid the 'party scene' that has flourished as a response to tight security measures and six-day working weeks.

Popular frustration is also vented at those in power, with the government regularly derided as self-serving and corrupt. Several large-scale land-grabs took place following the formation of the interim government, with powerful ex-mujaheddin figures and others close to Hamid Karzai implicated in lining their pockets by illegally evicting residents. The construction boom, with myriad 'poppy palaces' sprouting across the city, has further highlighted the creation of an Afghan elite separate from the mass of Kabulis, who have seen few of the benefits of the economic boom. As their name suggests, many of these luxurious villas are the products of another sort of ill-gotten gain.

Kabul's exploding economy has been driven by the dollar, having an inflationary effect on the price of basic commodities. One side-effect of the influx of NGOs has been to draw qualified Afghans away from the public sector. A teacher earning US\$40 a month could earn seven times that as a translator for an international organisation, weakening Afghan institutions. Not enough has been done to bolster the state, either by foreign donors refusing to disburse monies to the Afghan government in favour of funding NGOs, or by allowing NGOs to direct policy or become providers of services in place of the state. Capacity building still has some way to go.

Progress is being made, and there are many NGOs doing valuable work, and fostering strong ties to the communities they work in. But as the riots of 2006 demonstrated, wider discontent could cause the bubble to burst yet.

Also levelled in war was the model district of Darulaman in west Kabul, home of the former palace and the Kabul Museum.

Kabul International Airport lies north-east of the city at the end of Great Massoud (formerly Airport) Rd, near the Socialist-era apartment blocks of Microrayon.

## Maps

Shops and street kids in the Chicken St area sell large maps of Kabul but these are copies of 1970s maps and very out of date.

**Afir** (Map p85; House 2, Street 3, Sarakh-e Taimani, Qala-e Fatullah; ☎ 3-8pm) Has a popular and useful Kabul map aimed primarily at expats.

**AIMS** (Map p85; ☎ 070 248827; www.aims.org.af; Salang Wat) Sells detailed city and country maps produced mainly for government and NGOs. Order in advance.

## INFORMATION

### Bookshops

In addition to the shops below, Zardozi (p102) has a large book-swap facility.

**Habibi Bookstore** (Map p85; Chicken St) Another well-stocked bookshop, also sells some international magazines.

**Shah M Books** (Map p85; Charahi Sadarat) Comprehensive stocked with Afghan-related titles – if they don't have it, it probably wasn't published. Wide range of postcards (with stamps). A mobile shop (Books & Rivers) was being launched as we went to press.

### Cultural Centres

**British Council** (☎ 079 9000 101; www.britishcouncil.org/afghanistan.htm; House No 15-17 behind Nadiya High School, Kart-e-Parwan) Visiting Arts programme provides links between Afghan and UK artists; occasional events.

**Centre Culturel Français** (Map p93; ☎ 079 9304 351; www.ambafrance-af.org; Charahi Malik Asghar, next to Lycée Estiglal) Occasional film showing and music concerts.

**Goethe-Institut Kabul** (Map p85; ☎ 070 274606; www.goethe.de/kabul; Shah Mahmoud Wat, Wazir Akbar Khan) Film showings most Saturdays.

### Emergency

**Afghan NGO Security Office** (ANSO; ☎ 070 283320/079 9322 133; coordinator@afngso.org)

**Ambulance** (☎ 020 112/079 9357 049)

**ISAF** (☎ 079 9512 904)

**Kabul City Police** (☎ 020 100/079 9046 714)

**Kabul Fire Brigade** (☎ 020 210 1333)

### Internet Access

Internet places open and close with reckless abandon. Broadband is the standard, with fees around 40Afg to 70Afg per hour.

**AM Internet Club** (Map p85; Flower St)

**Bakhtary Net Cafe** (Map p85; Chicken St) In courtyard off main street.

**New Haider Internet** (Map p85; Charahi Haji Yaqub)

**Park Net Cafe** (Map p93; Mohammed Jan Khan Wat)

## Internet Resources

**Survival Guide to Kabul** (www.kabulguide.net)

Has a very useful bulletin board for news among the expat community.

**What's On in Kabul** (kabul.news@caritas.org) Weekly newsletter with news and listings.

## Media

### NEWSPAPERS & MAGAZINES

Kabul has a selection of English-language newspapers. The *Afghanistan Times*, *Kabul Times*, *Kabul Daily* and *Kabul Weekly* are the pick, all featuring a mix of local journalism and syndicated international news. Also look out for the military *ISAF News*, in English, Dari and Pashto.

**Afghan Scene** (www.afghanscene.com) Free glossy monthly magazine aimed at the international community, distributed widely across Kabul.

**New Kabul/Les Nouvelles de Kaboul** (www.ainaworld.org) A new magazine in English and French produced by media NGO Aina, launched as we were going to press.

## RADIO

These radio stations broadcast on FM in Kabul (remember that news bulletins are on the half hour):

**Arman FM** (98.1FM) Afghan popular music.

**BBC World Service** (89.0FM)

**Deutsche Weille** (90.5FM) In English and German.

**Kabul Armed Forces Network/National Public Radio** (107.3FM) US radio.

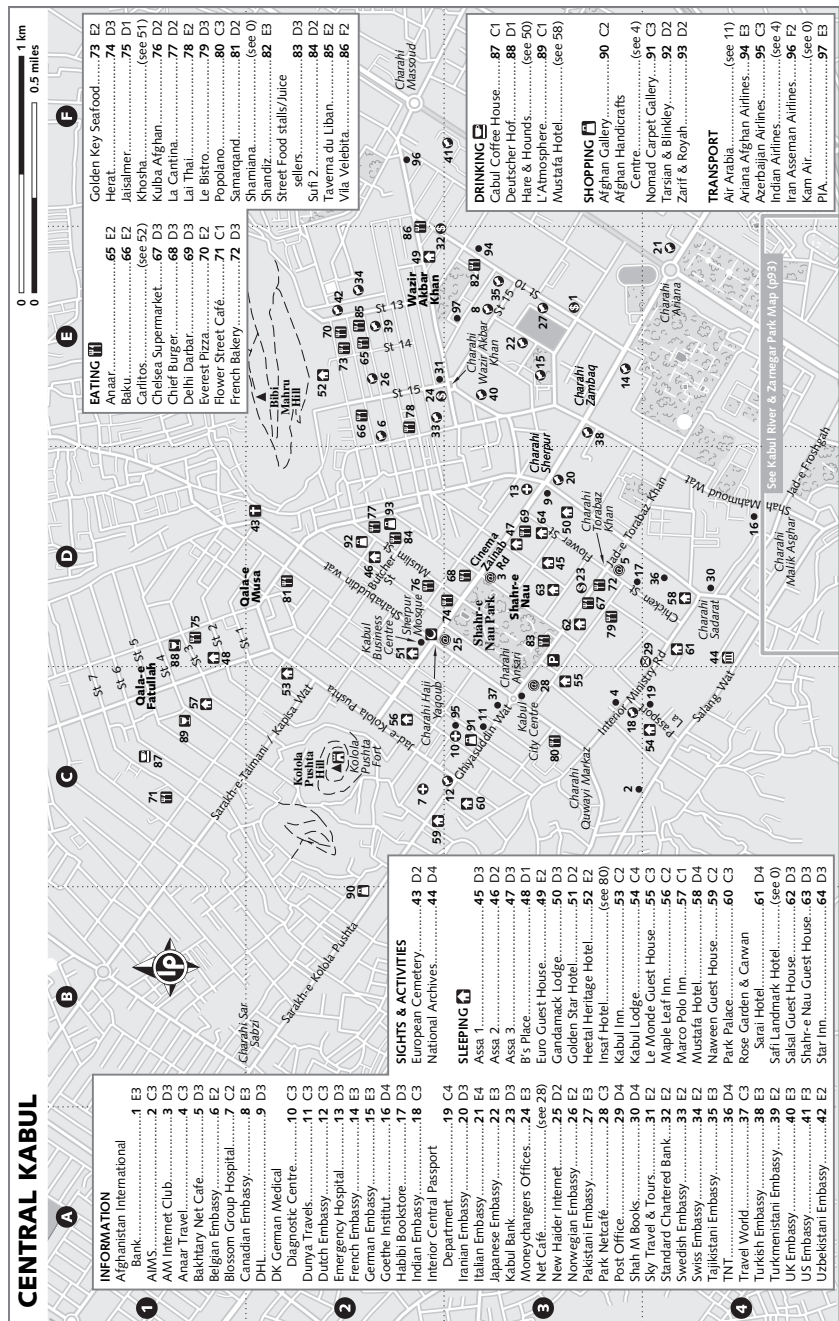
**Radio France Internationale** (89.5FM) In English and French.

## Medical Services

There are plenty of pharmacies in Kabul, but check drugs for expiry dates. Embassies can provide lists of recommended medical services, but the following hospitals are run to international standards:

**Blossom Group Hospital** (Map p85; ☎ 070 298397; www.blossom-group.org; Hanzala Mosque Rd, Shahr-e Nau; ☎ 24hr) Private Indian-run hospital with walk in general practice clinic and emergency treatment.

**Cure International Hospital** (Map p80; ☎ 079 9883 830; near Darulaman Palace, Jad-e Darulaman; ☎ 8am-3pm Sat-Wed, 8am-12pm Thu, closed Fri) General practice and surgery.





## KABUL'S STREET CHILDREN

The UN estimates that around 60,000 school-age children work on the streets of Kabul. Contrary to popular belief, most of these children aren't orphans, they're just desperately poor. You'll see street children everywhere, cleaning shoes, collecting rubbish or burning *spandi* (a sort of aromatic herb) in tin cans and waving the smoke over people for good luck and a few afghanis. A good wage is 50Afg to 100Afg a day.

Many children have to support parents who are impoverished, disabled or widowed. Although the Afghan constitution makes primary education compulsory, economic necessity forces these children away from school. Many schools charge fees that are out of reach of the poorest Afghans, and while school registration has increased five-fold since the fall of the Taliban, around seven million children don't attend classes, over half the children in the country.

One highly regarded charity working with street children is **Aschiana** ([www.aschiana.com](http://www.aschiana.com)). Meaning 'nest' in Dari, Aschiana recognises the problem of children being forced to work out of need, and provides basic literacy and numeracy education to the poorest children. Many children attend classes in the morning and receive a meal at lunch before going to work in the afternoon. Older children also receive vocational training once they can read and write. Based primarily in Kabul, Aschiana has recently started to expand to Herat and Mazar-e Sharif, as well as setting up out-reach camps for returning refugees. It's an uphill struggle, but several hundred children a month are integrated into the education system through their work: one for every five kids working Kabul's streets.

**DK German Medical Diagnostic Centre** (Map p85; ☎ 079 9136 211; [www.medical-kabul.com](http://www.medical-kabul.com); Street 3, Charahi Ansari; treatment requires deposit of US\$100/5000Afg against cost of treatment; ☎ 9am-5pm, closed Fri) Offers wide range of laboratory diagnostic tests, vaccinations and X-rays. Dental and gynaecological services were being introduced as we went to press.

**Emergency Hospital** (Map p85; ☎ 070 287519; Charahi Sherpur; ☎ 24 hr) Emergency surgical centre only.

## Money

For exchange, ask at your hotel or guest-house; banks aren't much help. Money-changers are found at Charahi Torabaz Khan or in the market around Pul-e Khishti Mosque. Look for the small stands with piles of money. There are also some money-changers around the taxi stands of Serai Shomali motor park.

**Afghanistan International Bank** (Map p85; behind Amani High School, Wazir Akbar Khan; ☎ 9am-5pm Sun-Thu, 9am-1pm Sat) ATM. Also has 24-hour ATMs at Kabul Airport, Intercontinental Hotel, Kabul City Centre, Chelsea Supermarket and Supreme PX. Issues dollars and afghanis.

**Kabul Bank** (Map p85; Jad-e Torabaz Khan) Also has a branch of Western Union.

**Standard Chartered Bank** (Map p85; Street 10, Wazir Akbar Khan; ☎ 9am-6pm) Issues dollars and afghanis.

## Post

**Central Post Office** (Map p93; Deh Afghanistan)

**Post Office** (Map p85; Interior Ministry Rd)

## INTERNATIONAL COURIERS

**DHL** (Map p85; ☎ 070 276362/079 9750 750; Charahi Sherpur; ☎ 9am-6pm Sat-Thu)

**Federal Express** (Map p80; ☎ 020 2500525; Sarakh-e Khai, Karte Se; ☎ 8am-5pm Sat-Thu)

**TNT** (Map p85; ☎ 020 2200266; Charahi Torabaz Khan; ☎ 8am-5pm Sat-Thu)

## Telephone

Kabul's phones are in a state of confusion (see p209). In addition to the new mobile phone networks, Kabul had some digital fixed lines installed in 2000 with seven-digit numbers, and a decrepit five-digit analogue network. Both can usually only call other local numbers.

It's possible to place calls at any of Kabul's post offices, but it's easier to go to any of the phone stands found on any street.

## Tourist Information

**Afghan Tourist Organisation** Head office (Map p80; ☎ 020 2300 338; [atokabul@yahoo.com](mailto:atokabul@yahoo.com); Great Massoud Rd); Asmai Wat (Map p93; ☎ 079 9304 516) The head office is the place to go for letters to extend visas. The Asmai Wat branch can organise drivers and translators. There are two largely ineffective sub-offices at the airport and Intercontinental Hotel.

## TOURS

Two private tour operators run good quality city tours of Kabul, taking in the major

sights, and can also arrange trips to Istalif, the Panjshir Valley and the like:

**Afghan Logistics & Tours** (☎ 070 277408/079 9391 462; [www.afghanlogisticstours.com](http://www.afghanlogisticstours.com); full-day Kabul tour US\$80)

**Great Game Travel** (☎ 079 9489 120/077 9489 120; [www.greatgametravel.com](http://www.greatgametravel.com); full-day Kabul tour US\$80, US\$60 per person if four people)

## Travel Agencies

The following agents are reliable providers of international air tickets. Plenty more agents are clustered around Charahi Ansari.

**Anaar Travel** (Map p85; ☎ 079 9308 303; [www.anaartravels.com](http://www.anaartravels.com); opposite Indian Embassy, Interior Ministry Rd) General sales agent for Indian Airlines.

**Dunya Travels** (Map p85; ☎ 079 9386 921/070 238700; [www.dunyatravels.com](http://www.dunyatravels.com); Charahi Ansari)

**Sky Travel & Tours** (Map p85; ☎ 020 210 4410/079 9484 848; [www.skytravel.com](http://www.skytravel.com); Street 15, Wazir Akbar Khan)

**Travel World** (Map p85; ☎ 020 2203453; Charahi Ansari)

## DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Security in Kabul is now handled primarily by the Afghan police and army – the ISAF military patrols that were such a common sight until recently have largely taken a back seat. Although the situation can change incredibly quickly, Kabul is generally a calm city, with the greatest risk to personal safety being the insane traffic.

It's essential to keep in touch with the news, and to talk to locals and other foreigners to gauge the popular mood, as well as getting security briefings where possible. That said, the riots that shook Kabul in 2006 took almost everyone by surprise. At such times, visibly Western buildings or interests can be targets.

There have been several incidents of street crime against foreigners, mainly bag-snatching. A vehicular version of this has been the 'broken car' ruse – your vehicle is flagged down by a local claiming his car has broken and needs assistance. When your attention is drawn, his accomplices rob your vehicle. We recommend keeping all doors locked when driving in Kabul.

We don't recommend walking in Kabul after dark. Aside from the crime risk, there are very few streetlights, so broken pavements present a genuine accident risk. Many international organisations maintain curfews for their staff.

There have been kidnapping attempts (successful and unsuccessful) against foreigners by criminal gangs. For more on kidnapping, and other security concerns, see the Safety in Afghanistan chapter, p68.

One environmental hazard you'll quickly become aware of is the terrible quality of Kabul's air, thick with pollution from the traffic, thousands of generators and the endless dust. Anyone staying in the city for any length of time is liable to pick up the 'Kabul cough' – seeking fresh air outside the city is the best remedy. In winter and spring, the dust can quickly turn streets into mud slicks.

## SIGHTS Babur's Gardens

Laid out by the Mughal ruler Babur in the early 16th century, and the site of his tomb, these **gardens** (Bagh-e Babur; Map p80; admission 100Afg; ☎ 7am-sunset) are the loveliest spot in Kabul. At 11 hectares, they are also the largest public green space in the city. Left to ruins during the war, they have been spectacularly restored by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC).

The garden was laid out in the classical *charbagh* (four garden) pattern, with a series of quartered rising terraces split by a central watercourse. The garden was used as a pleasure spot by repeated Mughal rulers, but fell into disrepair after the dynasty lost control of Kabul. Abdur Rahman Khan restored much of the grounds at the turn of the 20th century. Public access was allowed in the 1930s, but the gardens were despoiled and many trees cut for firewood in the anarchy that swept through Kabul during the civil war.

The garden is surrounded by high walls, rebuilt by the local community. Visitors are greeted by a large traditional caravanserai which is planned to open as a visitors centre, showing many of the finds excavated in the archaeological dig that preceded the restoration. Although modern, it stands on the footprint of an older building of the same plan built as a refuge for the poor in the 1640s. From the caravanserai the eye is immediately swept up the terraces, following the line of the white marble watercourse. On either side the grounds are deeply planted with herbaceous beds and saplings. Many species chosen for replanting

are specifically mentioned in the *Baburnama*, including walnut, cherry, quince, mulberry and apricot trees. In the centre of the garden is a pavilion built by Abdur Rahman Khan, with a series of information boards on the restoration programme.

Above this there's a delicate white marble mosque built in 1647 by Shah Jahan, who commissioned the Taj Mahal. While on a much smaller scale, the similarities in style are evident in the clean carving of the stone.

Overlooking the whole of the garden from the top terrace is Babur's tomb, inside a simple enclosure. Babur wished to be buried under the open sky so his grave is uncovered, surrounded by a simple marble screen. The headstone says it was erected for 'the light-garden of the God-forgiven angel king whose rest is in the garden of Heaven'. Given the near-miraculous resurrection of the grounds, it's an easy poetic sentiment to agree with.

## Kabul Museum

The **Kabul Museum** (Map p80; Darulaman; admission 20Afg, camera 100Afg; ☎ 8am-3.30pm) was once one of the greatest museums in the world. Its exhibits, ranging from Hellenistic gold coins to Buddhist statuary and Islamic bronzes, testified to Afghanistan's location at the crossroads of Asia. After years of abuse during the civil war, help from the international community and the peerless dedication of its staff means the museum is slowly rising from the ashes.

The museum opened in 1919, and was almost entirely stocked with items excavated in Afghanistan. As the fall of communist Kabul became apparent with the Soviet withdrawal, many of the most valuable pieces were moved into secure storage, but the majority of exhibits remained in situ. Unfortunately the museum quickly found itself on the frontline of the mujaheddin's terrible fight for Kabul. Between 1992 and '94 the museum was used as a mujaheddin base. During this period the museum was massively looted – not just ransacked – but with care taken to select the most valuable pieces for resale on the illicit antique market (the museum's library and inventory was also lost at this time, to hamper efforts to trace the provenance of stolen goods). Among the priceless treasures lost include many of the Bagram Ivories (see p109), the Kunduz Hoard of Graeco-Bactrian coins (see boxed text p163) and unique Gandharan statues of Buddha. During this looting, the museum was further damaged by a rocket attack that destroyed its upper floor. When the Rabbani government regained control of the area, soldiers posted to guard the site continued ad hoc looting of their own.

On capturing Kabul in 1996 the Taliban vowed to protect what remained, but it was a short-lived promise. In March 2001, as the giant Buddhas at Bamiyan were being levelled, soldiers entered the museum with hammers and smashed what statues and other image-bearing exhibits they could

## BABUR, THE FIRST MUGHAL

Born in 1483 to the ruler of the Ferghana Valley in modern Uzbekistan, Zahiruddin Babur inherited his father's kingdom before he was even a teenager. His early career was less than brilliant. By the age of 20 the young king (a descendant of Timur on his father's side and Genghis Khan on his mother's side) had repeatedly captured and lost his beloved Samarkand, only to be driven out of the Ferghana by Uzbek warlords.

This misfortune sent him to Afghanistan, where he took Kabul in 1504. Here he prospered, visiting Herat during its last days of Timurid rule, capturing Kandahar and campaigning in the Hazarajat. Afghanistan also became the springboard for his ultimate conquest of India, where he founded the Mughal dynasty ('Mughal' being a corruption of 'Mongol' – local parlance for anyone from Central Asia).

But Babur wasn't just an empire builder. He recorded his memoirs in the *Baburnama*, Islamic literature's first autobiography, relating everything from his military campaigns to the after effects of his drinking parties and the choosing of plants for his formal gardens. Babur's intimate character sketches of generals and poets bring his court to life in rich detail, and reveal a great love for Afghanistan and a distaste for the climate of his new Indian empire. Babur died in 1530.

## THE BACTRIAN GOLD

In 1978 a hoard of Kushan gold was excavated by Soviet archaeologists near Shiberghan. Dubbed the 'Bactrian Gold', it was a trove to rival Tutankhamen's tomb in Egypt, but decades of war have kept it hidden from the world.

The find had barely been catalogued by the time the Russian tanks rolled in, and the treasure was never publicly displayed. Over the years, stories grew up around it – it had been spirited to Moscow, looted by the mujaheddin, sold by the Taliban or just plain lost. In 2004 the Afghan government revealed its location to the world, safely stored in the national bank vaults, using power tools to open the safes as the keys had long disappeared.

The gold revealed inside was astounding. A crown made of thousands of leaves of yellow metal, curly-haired cupids riding dolphins, clasps showing Persian gods, and a sensual brooch of the Greek goddess Aphrodite with Bactrian wings and an Indian face. All rich evidence of the cultural melting pot of 1st century Afghanistan.

The Bactrian Gold has yet to be exhibited in Kabul as security still isn't good enough to put it on public display. But at the end of 2006 it formed the centrepiece of a special exhibition at the Musée Guimet in Paris, appropriately titled 'Afghanistan: Rediscovered Treasures'. Several of the remaining Bagram Ivories also featured in the exhibition, alongside Kushan glass goblets and material from Ai Khanoum. It's hoped that before too long the Afghan people will be able to enjoy their heritage in Kabul for themselves.

find. The oxymoronically-titled Minister for Culture led the destruction.

That a museum still stands is little short of a marvel. Less than a third of the collection survives, but there's a surprising amount on display. In the entrance hall is a 15th-century black marble basin from Kandahar, known colloquially as the Buddha's Begging Bowl because of the carved lotus at its base. To the left is a large Greek inscription from Ai Khanoum and to the right is the Rabatak Tablet found near Pul-e Khumri in 1993, covered with yet-to-be deciphered Bactrian script.

Further on, a pair of glass cases display Graeco-Bactrian Buddha statues from the 3rd and 4th centuries AD in limestone and schist, the few to escape the Taliban's rage. Other treasures downstairs include a lovely carved marble door from Kabul, and a reconstructed stucco section of a 12th-century mosque from Lashkar Gah. Exhibits are interspersed with photos of looted items and the half-demolished museum.

The highlight of the museum is the Nuri-stani gallery upstairs. It is filled with huge wooden deities and ancestor figures, carved before the 1890s when the region was still pagan. Goddesses ride mountain goats, warriors sit astride horses and loving couples are carved on posts for the marital bed. As works of art they're radically different to anything from elsewhere in Afghanistan;

the flat mask-like faces seem more Central African than Central Asian. The statues were chopped up by the Taliban, but have been magnificently restored.

Security is tight at the museum, with bag checks as you exit as well as on entering. While you wait, take a moment to read the plaque outside the front door: 'a nation stays alive when its culture stays alive'.

The old **royal palace of Darulaman** sits opposite the Kabul Museum. Built by Amanullah in the 1920s, in grand European style, the palace is now little more than an empty shell. Don't explore the palace too closely as there are still unexploded ordnances (UXOs) in the area. Between the two look out for the rusting steam train, more evidence of Amanullah's ill-fated experiment in modernity – only a few miles of track were ever laid.

## European Cemetery

This **cemetery** (Map p85; Kabre Ghora, Shahabuddin Wat; admission by donation; ☎ 8am-4pm) was built in 1879 by the British army for the dead of the Second Anglo-Afghan War.

The cemetery contains around 150 graves. Most are from members of Kabul's international community from before the war. Only a few of the original British Army headstones remain, now mounted in the south wall. They have been joined by newer memorial stones added by the British, Canadian, German and Italian ISAF contingents.

The cemetery's most famous resident is Aurel Stein, the acclaimed Silk Road archaeologist of the early 20th century. Stein spent much of his career obsessed by Alexander's campaigns in the east, but his British citizenship meant that the Afghan authorities always refused him permission to dig in the country. In 1943 he got the go-ahead at the age of 82, only to catch the flu and die a few days after arriving in Kabul. His grave is marked with a large cross and frequently a wreath. More recently, the cemetery saw the burial of the French aid worker Bettina Goislard, murdered in Ghazni in 2003.

The cemetery has been maintained since the 1980s by Rahimullah, supported by a small stipend from the British Embassy. His story of meeting a disapproving Mullah Omar (the Taliban had a guesthouse next door) is worth the hearing, and always popular with journalists.

### Ka Faroshi Bird Market

Entering Kabul's **bird market** (Map p93; Kucha-ye Ka Faroshi; ☞ Sat-Thu) is like stepping back in time a hundred years, to a corner of the city untouched by war or modernisation. Also known as the Alley of Straw Sellers, it's a narrow lane tucked away behind the Pul-e Khishti Mosque, lined with stalls and

booths selling birds by the dozen, plus the occasional rabbit.

King of all the birds on sale is the *kowk* (fighting partridge). These are prized by their owners who lavish great care on them, and keep them in domed wicker cages that are almost works of art in themselves. *Kowk* are fought on Friday mornings in quick bouts of strength (the birds are too valuable to allow them to be seriously harmed), with spectators gambling on the result. Their highly territorial nature also lets them act as decoys for hunters, attracting potential rivals who end up in the pot.

Similar to the *kowk* is the *budana*, a small lark-like bird. These are also fought, especially among Kandaharis. Unbelievably, their small size means that their owner frequently keeps them tucked in his trousers, bringing them out for contest and display. More benign are the myriad canaries and finches, kept simply for their song.

At the far end of the bazaar are the *kaftar* (doves), a common sight in Kabul's late afternoon skies (see boxed text below).

### Bala Hissar & the City Walls

The old seat of royal power, a fortress has stood on the site of the Bala Hissar since the 5th century AD, and quite possibly before. It sits at the foot of the Koh-e Shir Darwaza mountains, guarding the southwestern approaches to Kabul.

The **citadel** (Map p80) as it stands today was built at the end of the 19th century. The previous fortress was destroyed by the vengeful British army at the end of the Second Anglo-Afghan War. Now, as then, it is used by the army and closed to visitors. However, the old city walls snake out from its towers along the mountain ridges and make a fantastic walk, raising you high above the dirty air of the city to give some breathtaking views of the capital.

The starting point is at the foot of the huge cemetery of Shohada-ye Salehin. Most approaches will take you past Jad-e Maiwand and the ruined Shor Bazaar, a traditional centre for Kabul's musicians, and the place where 'Bukhara' Burnes was killed by the mob in 1841. The road brings you along the southern foot of Bala Hissar, with good views up to its ramparts. Start the walk around 1km after the citadel.

#### DOVE CHARMING

Flying doves is almost as much a national sport as *buzkashi*. It even has its trademark bird, the white-bodied and grey-winged *amiree*. Owners keep their flocks in rooftop cages and fly them every night. It looks like a peaceful pastime but is actually fiercely competitive. As a flock circles in the sky, a rival flock may be released by another owner to fly amongst it. Battle joined, the new flock attempts to charm birds away from its companions, and to return with them to its new owner, who scoops them up with a net. The owner, or *kaftar baz*, uses whistles, calls and food to manoeuvre his birds to carry out the deception. If a friend's dove is captured, it can be requested back by an appropriate show of contrition. Otherwise, the new owner adds it to his flock or sells it in the bazaar. The best quality doves can sell for up to 2500Afg in the Ka Faroshi market.

There are two routes leading up the slopes to the mountain's ridge. A longer path on a gentler gradient takes you to an obvious pass between two peaks. To the left was territory held by Hekmatyar during the civil war, with Massoud's men to the right. A better alternative is to keep to the right and head steeply uphill straight away. A 40-minute hike brings you to a high ridge from where you can look east to the Bala Hissar, and north to central Kabul – Shahr-e Nau Park, Jade Maiwand and the Pul-e Khishti Mosque are good monuments to take your bearings from. Boys quite often fly kites here. At this point you're already higher than Koh-e Asmai (TV Mountain) opposite.

Continue west along the ridge. Almost straight away you meet the old walls, several metres thick in places. Although the path is clear and well-beaten, it's possible to find plenty of spent ammunition here, so resist the temptation to nose around any of the foxholes near the walls. As you slowly ascend the ridge curves north, revealing splendid views of west Kabul and Darulaman.

After half an hour of walking you'll near the end of the ridge and a final view – this time straight down to Babur's Gardens and Kabul Zoo. With views to all sides, this is the best spot in Kabul for understanding the city's geography, especially the narrow strategic gap where Koh-e Shir Darwaza and Koh-e Asmai almost meet – known as the Shir Darwaza (Lion's Gate) – with the Kabul Valley stretching far in either direction. Also look out for the platform of the **Noon Gun**, and follow the path downhill towards it.

The Noon Gun is in fact two cannons dating from Abdur Rahman's reign. They were fired daily, and to mark the end of the Ramadan feast, but only the barrels now remain. From here, follow the paths through the local houses to emerge near Babur's Gardens.

The walk should take three or four hours in total. Take a sun hat and plenty of water. Although there aren't any red rocks designating mines, we'd still advise you to stick to the worn trail.

## Kabul Zoo

The **zoo** (Map p80; Charahi Deh Mazang; admission 100Afg; ☎ 8am-sunset) is a popular place for Kabulis in need of recreation. Western animal lovers might find it more than a little depressing.

Visitors are greeted by a bronze statue of Marjan the lion, the zoo's most celebrated animal. A present from West Germany in the 1960s, Marjan survived life on the front-line and a Taliban grenade attack, only to expire soon after Kabul's 2001 liberation. He has since been replaced by a pair of lions presented by China. A couple of sloth bears can be seen in a pit, pacing like asylum inmates. Some wolves do the same nearby, next to a cage of grumpy-looking black vultures. Only the colony of macaques look happy with their surroundings, with the young diving pell-mell into their moat (this could be an illusion though – one effected an escape during our visit, and was rounded up by visitors using the time-honoured method of throwing chairs at it).

The zoo sits on the Deh Mazang roundabout, in front of the newly rebuilt Traffic Police headquarters (until recently one of the most spectacularly smashed buildings in Kabul). The Minar-e Abdul Wakil Khan stands in the centre of the roundabout, erected for a Nuristani general who fought against Bacha Saqao's rebellion in 1929.

## National Gallery

The **National Gallery** (Map p93; Asmai Wat; admission 250Afg; ☎ 8am-4pm) contains a mix of historic pictures and paintings by modern Afghan artists. Like Kabul's other cultural institutions, it didn't escape the Taliban's zealous attentions, as the cabinet displaying ripped up watercolour portraits attests. Amazingly, however, the gallery's staff fought back as only artists could. Knowing the Taliban's juncture against images of living things, many of the exhibits were over-painted with watercolours, hiding a horse behind a tree, or turning a person into a mountain view. Over 120 paintings were saved from destruction in this way when the zealots came with their knives.

Some of the most poignant paintings are relatively recent, including a moving picture of Kabul in rubble by Dr M Yousef Asefi, with a ruined well and bloodied slippers picked out against the rubble. Upstairs, visitors are greeted first by a copy of the famous *Remnants of an Army* by the Victorian painter Lady Elizabeth Butler, showing the last survivor of the British retreat from Kabul limping into camp. There are some quite lovely watercolours of Kabul life in

the next room, plus views of some of the key moments of Afghan history, including the crowning of Ahmad Shah Durrani, and the slaying of Genghis Khan's grandson at Shahr-e Zohak.

At the end of the upstairs gallery is a room dedicated to Afghan leaders. Medieval amirs sit next to mujaheddin leaders like Abdul Haq. The modernisers Amanullah (here looking like an unfortunate cross between Hitler and Hirohito) and Nadir Shah look across from the opposite wall. One particularly striking portrait hangs in the corridor just outside, a sister of King Zahir Shah's wife (date and artist unknown) in a red traditional dress, looking out at the view with such an arresting gaze it would have driven the Taliban to apoplexy.

Outside the gallery is a long display room showing modern pictures for sale. Many of them were painted by the gallery's staff, who also give good guided tours.

### Sultani Museum

This private **museum** (Map p93; Asmai Wat; admission 200Afg; ☎ 8am-4pm) in the same grounds as the National Gallery is something of a curiosity. It was set up in 2004 by Ahmad Shah Sultani, a gold trader and sometime antiques dealer, who spent much of the civil war in exile in London. Here he collected a large collection of Afghan antiquities, aiming to preserve them for the country. Much of his collection is of looted or smuggled items, but those recognisably from the Kabul Museum have been returned. His collection has yet to be properly catalogued, but is thought to contain over 3000 pieces. Sultani's ultimate plan is to donate his collection to the state.

The museum is heavily locked, and on issuing your ticket the *chowkidar* (caretaker) goes through the laborious process of disabling the security alarms. The first room is full of Islamic-era manuscripts and some beautiful Qurans in just about every conceivable calligraphic script.

The following rooms are a treasure-trove of Afghan history, with artefacts from all periods jostling for space on the crowded shelves. Wooden stamps for stuccowork in mosques sit next to a delicate and stunning gold coronet, possibly of Kushan origin. There's a large display of coins – Graeco-Bactrian, Kushan, Sogdian and even Roman. Opposite are rare examples of Ghaznavid

and Ghorid pottery, nearly 1000 years old, and Nuristani wood carvings.

Poor labelling lets the exhibition down, often leaving you wondering exactly what you're looking at, and thirsting for more information (the 'cookie mud' from which many finds seem to have been dug remains a mystery). It's frustrating, but an oddly appropriate metaphor for the troubled state of Afghanistan's heritage.

### National Archive

Holding over 15,000 documents, the **National Archive** (Map p85; Salang Wat; admission free; ☎ 8am-5pm Sat-Thu) is housed in a palace built at the end of the 19th century by Abdur Rahman Khan for his son.

Important documents are on display (although some are copies, with the originals too valuable to show) including the treaty with the British Empire in 1919 that finally gave Afghanistan full independence. Accompanying this is a host of newspapers, period photos and old banknotes, although most labelling is in Dari. Older documents are present too, including a 14th-century letter written by Timur, and several Qurans dating from the Durrani period.

Although scholars will get the most out of a visit, the archive is still worth visiting for the building, with its attractive painted ceiling and carved woodwork. It's a slightly incongruous sight among the metal workshops that line this section of Salang Wat.

### Mausoleum of Nadir Shah

King Nadir Shah was assassinated in 1933, the time-honoured way that most Afghan leaders meet their fate. His monumental **tomb** (Map p80) sits overlooking east Kabul at Teppe Maranjan. It has suffered considerably in war.

The mausoleum is of imposing black marble, with monumental columns topped by a huge metal dome. Even if the facings weren't cracked and the dome punctured, the building gives the distinct impression that this was a man who'd rather have been feared than loved. The plinth in the centre of the mausoleum is symbolic; the royal graves are in a locked chamber beneath the building (look through the gate). The most recent addition is that of the wife of Zahir Shah, who died shortly before she could return from exile after the Taliban's fall.

Smashed steps lead downhill past more graves to the tomb of Sultan Mohammed Telai, Nadir Shah's great-great grandfather. Its arches are decorated in Italianate stucco, but the tomb itself is badly damaged and graffitied. The strategic location of the hill is readily apparent from here, and was much fought over in the 1990s.

Teppe Maranjan is thought to be the oldest continually inhabited part of Kabul, with excavations revealing coins and statuary from the Kushan period in the 4th century AD. One statue from this period, of Bodhisattva in meditation, is on display in the Kabul Museum (p88), clearly showing the fusion of Greek and Indian artistic traditions. Smashed by the Taliban, its restoration is a small triumph.

Kite-flying is a popular pursuit at Tepe Maranjan, which is the location for a large kite festival at Nauroz (see p95).

### Mausoleum of Abdur Rahman Khan

The **tomb** (Map p93) of the 'Iron Amir' sits in Zarnegar Park. Originally a palace, the building has a bulbous red dome atop

a whitewashed drum, and fussy decorative minarets. The park is surrounded by market traders but can be a good place to escape from the nearby bustle and traffic. The mausoleum itself is closed to visitors. On the opposite side of the park a huge new mosque was under construction when we visited, named for its private benefactor – confusingly called Haji Abdul Rahman (no relation to the amir).

### OMAR Land Mine Museum

This is a **museum** (Map80; ☎ 079 9349; [www.landmineclearance.org](http://www.landmineclearance.org); bottom of Tepe Maranjan; admission by donation, camera fee US\$5, video US\$50; ☒ Sun-Thu) that only a country like Afghanistan could host. Run by the Organisation for Mine clearance and Afghan Rehabilitation (OMAR), it acts as a training and education centre for land mine and UXO clearance.

The exhibit holds more than 60 types of mine that still litter the countryside, from small anti-personnel mines to those the size of dinner plates aimed at vehicles. There are mines made by almost any country you care to think of, except Afghanistan itself.





## RESTORING OLD KABUL

Precious little remains of old Kabul. Even before the war, ill-conceived Soviet town planners had started to tear down whole areas in favour of shabby concrete developments. Following the bombs and rockets, demolition has continued as the value of land has soared, and new buildings (concrete with lots of glass and fake pillars this time) are thrown up on a daily basis. Two organisations have been working with local communities to try to preserve as much of the traditional fabric of Kabul as possible.

The **Turquoise Mountain Foundation** ([www.turquoisemountain.org](http://www.turquoisemountain.org)) is working in the Murad Khane district, the oldest settlement on the north bank of the Kabul river, and just a stone's throw from the Serena Hotel. An oasis of traditional architecture, it also highlights some of the key challenges in saving old Kabul. The oldest areas are often poorest, with houses lacking basic services and streets clogged with detritus. At the same time, the riverside has some of the highest commercial value areas in Kabul, with a huge attendant pressure from developers. The Murad Khane project works closely with the local community, who lobbied the government in support of it. One of the first tasks was simply the removal of rubbish – in some places just doing this lowered the street level by over 2m. Next, the Foundation has started working with landlords to adopt valued buildings to restore them, co-funding the venture. Turquoise Mountain has set up a school in the Karte Parwan district, with Afghan masters teaching traditional woodwork, plaster, tiling and masonry techniques.

South of the river, the **Aga Khan Trust for Culture** ([www.akdn.org/agency/aktc.html](http://www.akdn.org/agency/aktc.html)) has been working in the Asheqan wa Arefan district around the Mausoleum of Timur Shah. By creating local employment, improving local water supplies and removing waste, the Trust has built a strong foundation for restoring the physical structure of the neighbourhood – from the delicate wooden latticework windows to rebuilding in mud-brick and plaster. Importantly, both projects demonstrate that restoration of old buildings can bring significant improvements to the quality of life of their residents, as well as raise awareness within the communities of the value of their heritage.

The most sobering by far are the Russian 'butterfly' mines often picked up by children mistaking them for plastic toys. Where most mines are deliberately camouflaged, these come in a range of bright, kid-friendly colours.

OMAR is the country's leading demining organisation, with over 500 Afghans working in mine-clearance. Education is an important second facet to their work. Murals and posters depicting types of mine and UXO can be found everywhere in Afghanistan – visual education aids being particularly important in a country with low literacy levels.

OMAR is also working in partnership with the UK charity **No Strings** ([www.nostrings.org.uk](http://www.nostrings.org.uk)), which uses puppet theatre to teach land mine safety information to children. Mines kill and injure more children than adults, and the use of story to illustrate what happens when a mine is picked up or disturbed is a highly effective educational tool. In addition to the theatre, a mobile cinema has been set up showing a No Strings film called *Chuche the Little Carpet Boy*, a mod-

ern Afghan version of the Pinocchio story, where a grandmother who has lost her family to land mines makes herself a new child out of carpet rags.

## Mausoleum of Timur Shah

Timur Shah was the first to make Kabul the capital of a unified kingdom. He died in 1793, but it was another 23 years before his **mausoleum** (Map p93; Mandayi market) was built, possibly due to the chaos after his death, caused by his leaving over 20 sons and no nominated successor. The building is a copy of the Indian Mughal style, an octagonal brick structure surmounted by a plain brick drum and shallow dome.

The mausoleum stands in one of the oldest surviving parts of Kabul, with its traditional street plan, houses and winding lanes. This area has been at the centre of a restoration project by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (see boxed text, above).

## Shah-e Doh Shamshira Mosque

Called the 'Mosque of the King of Two Swords', this **mosque** (Map p93) on Kabul

River must be one of the most unusual in Islam. Built in the 1920s during Amanullah's drive for modernisation, it looks like it would be more at home in Versailles or Vienna. The facades are all Italianate baroque with stucco detailing, picked out in white against a lurid lemon yellow paint-job. That it has two storeys is even more peculiar, and only the tiny minarets disclose the building's true purpose.

The mosque's name is derived from a far older story than Amanullah's strange architectural tastes. In the 7th century Kabul was a Hindu city, besieged by an Arab army. The Arab king was beheaded, but was so inspired by Allah that he continued fighting, leading his men to victory at the point of his two scimitars.

The mosque underwent large-scale restoration in 2002, and is a major focus for Kabul's Ashura commemorations. The attractive two-storey riverfront buildings stretching away from the mosque are unique in Kabul, and in urgent need of restoration.

### Bibi Mahru Hill

Also called *Teppe Bemaru*, this low hill (Map p85) overlooks Wazir Akbar Khan. It's popular with some expats living in the district for walking, and has reasonable views. At the top there's an Olympic-size swimming pool built by the Russians that's barely been full since it was built due to the difficulties of pumping water uphill. During the war the diving board was notorious as an execution spot.

The pool sits on the spot where Babur got his first views of Kabul. Nearly 350 years later, it was the site of an important turning point in the First Anglo-Afghan War. An ill-led British force was soundly defeated in battle here, a rout that paved the way for the disastrous retreat from Kabul.

## FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Security can be very tight in Kabul on public holidays and anniversaries such as *Masoud Day* (9 September). Despite official exhortations, *Victory Day* (28 April) is a low-key affair, as it celebrates the mujaheddin capture of Kabul in 1992. Many Kabulis prefer to mark this as the start of the slide into the anarchy and chaos that destroyed their city – a day of tragedy rather than celebration.

### Nauroz

The Afghan new year, *Nauroz* (above) is celebrated across Kabul. Festivities are concentrated in two main areas. The shrine of *Karata-e Sakhi* at the base of *Koh-e Asmai* is a traditional point of celebration, where flags are raised to mark the new year. There's more of a spectacle around the Mausoleum of *Nadir Shah* at *Teppe Maranjan*, which hosts a *Fighting Kite Festival* on the day. When this was held in 2005 for the first time in 30 years it attracted over 150,000 attendees, Kabul's most festive day out in years.

Concerts are held across the city – check with the FCCS (p84). *Ghazi Stadium* is also used to host special events, including a farmer's parade of livestock, and the last *buzkashi* of the season.

### Barf-e Awal

The first snowfall of winter is called *Barf-e Awal*. Many Kabulis play surprise games (*barfi*) on their friends at this time, sending them riddles in an Afghan variant of trick-or-treat. Whoever receives their riddle first, must treat the sender to a meal. The riddles are traditionally sent to the home (so many people won't answer their door on this day), but in modern Afghanistan look for people sending joke text messages to their friends with the first flurry of snow.

## SLEEPING

Most accommodation in Kabul is based in *Shahr-e Nau*, close to *Chicken St* or *Shahr-e Nau Park*. Guesthouses extend into *Wazir Akbar Khan*, jostling for space alongside the embassies. For those staying in Kabul long-term, room rates are usually negotiable. Unless noted, all guesthouses have secure parking. Prices exclude 10% tax.

### Budget

**Park Hotel** (Map p93; ☎ 020 2103 355; Mohammad Jan Khan Wat; r US\$6) This hotel sits above an arcade of electronics shops. One step up from a *chaikhana*, it has simple cell-like rooms with grubby walls, and a large communal area full of local men lounging over endless pots of tea. Don't expect too much of the shared bathrooms.

**Salsal Guest House** (Map p85; ☎ 079 9734 202; Jadd-e Torabaz Khan; s/d US\$10/20) This is a great new addition to the budget hotel scene, and the pick of the ultra-cheapies. Carpeted rooms

are small but on the cosy side, with a fan and decent bedding. Shared bathrooms are pretty clean with hot water, and the management is helpful.

**Spinzar Hotel** (Map p93; ☎ 020 22891; Pul-e Bagh-e Omomi; s/d \$20/40, s/d with shower US\$40/50) Popular with Afghan businessmen, this tall greenish building has commanding views over the river. Rooms and shared bathrooms alike are drab but clean. The 4th-floor restaurant is worth visiting for non-guests, for both the views and decent Afghan food.

**Mustafa Hotel** (Map p85; ☎ 070 276021; www.mustafahotel.com; Charahi Sadarat; s/d from US\$35/50, half-board supplement US\$10; ☎) Truly a Kabul institution, the Mustafa was the main post-Taliban hang-out for journoes, 'security consultants' and other would-be adventurers. If the high-rolling days have passed slightly with the death of its irrepressible manager, Wais Faizi, it's still a good place to stay, with small comfy rooms, hot water and satellite TV in the lounge. There's a special 'backpacker' rate of US\$20 per day including internet for those booking in advance online.

**Star Inn** (Map p85; ☎ 079 9143 252; Flower St; s/d incl breakfast US\$35/45) This tidy little hotel has a good central location. Rooms have attached bathrooms and TV, although some are a bit on the poky side. Communal areas are nicely decorated with Afghan textiles giving a friendly air, and the place is scrubbed spotless.

The hotels listed below were popular with backpackers until recently, when the police banned them from accepting foreign guests. We've listed them in the hope that improved security will allow travellers to return in the future.

**Pashtoonistan Hotel** (Map p93; Pul-e Bagh-e Omomi; US\$10) Signed only in Dari, this place has a flat rate for its rooms, each containing between three and five beds. The communal bathroom is pretty basic, but par for the course for this rock-bottom choice.

**Zarnigar Hotel** (Map p93; ☎ 020 2100 980; zarnigar\_afghanistan@hotmail.com; Mohammad Jan Khan Wat; s/d US\$10/15) A few doors down from the Jamil, this can be a good choice. The rooms are simple but clean, with shared bathrooms. The hotel also has a decent restaurant overlooking the street, a good place to watch the world go past over a plate of *pulao* (rice dish).

**Jamil Hotel** (Map p93; ☎ 079 3212 128; Mohammad Jan Khan Wat; s/d US\$10/20) Rooms have en suite, and although there is sometimes a problem with the water, the management should keep you supplied with buckets. The hotel isn't brilliantly signed – it's next to Al-Miraj Electronics.

## Midrange

**Euro Guest House** (Map p85; ☎ 070 197220/079 9342 705; hamidwl@netscape.net; Street 15, Wazir Akbar Khan; r incl breakfast from US\$40; ☎) Tangerine walls on the main street through Wazir Akbar Khan make the Euro hard to miss. There are a selection of different rooms (up to US\$100), but the cheaper end are the best value. Service is good, and as with most guesthouses, the Euro can arrange drivers and the like.

**Insaf Hotel** (Map p85; ☎ 070 286384; Charahi Ansari; r US\$50) Close to the action around Shahr-e Nau Park, this modern hotel has en suite rooms that are simply but decently decorated. There's one price for one or two beds. Next to Popolano restaurant, part of the hotel also acts as a wedding hall, so week-ends are potentially noisy affairs.

**Park Residence** (Map p85; ☎ 070 225038; park\_residence@hotmail.com; Charahi Ansari; r incl breakfast US\$50; ☎) Look twice for the entrance to this place facing the park – security is tight but unobtrusive. Modern rooms have en suites and are positively cosy, with a fridge and satellite TV; there's also a small bookshop and a pleasant garden.

**Marco Polo Inn** (Map p85; ☎ 070 274542; Street 3, Qala-e Fatullah; r US\$50; ☎) This new guesthouse run by an Afghan-German is a great deal. Rooms, with attached bathroom, are very nicely furnished with lots of dark wood giving the place an almost Bavarian feel. There's a restaurant too, and a neat garden to relax in.

**Assa 1** (Map p85; ☎ 079 9555 666; info@assa.com.af; off Flower St; r US\$50; ☎) Another long-standing favourite, this medium-sized guesthouse has a selection of well-turned out rooms, favoured by long-term guests. Worth a look, there is also Assa 2 and Assa 3 just around the corner, offering more of the same for the same price.

**Rose Garden & Carwan Sarai Hotel** (Map p85; ☎ 079 9013 055; carwan\_sarai@yahoo.com; Interior Ministry Rd; s/d US\$50/60, r with bathroom US\$66; ☎) Formerly named the Karwansara Guesthouse, this place is a lovely old merchant's house set in a large and leafy garden. Some of the rooms are a little small, but they're all turned out well enough for comfort. The restaurant has good Afghan and international dishes.

**Park Palace** (Map p85; ☎ 070 656561; parkpalace\_kabul@hotmail.com; Ghiyassudin Wat, Kolola Pushta; r incl

breakfast US\$55; ☎ ☎) A deservedly popular hotel with consultants and long-term stays, the Park Palace has good quality en suite rooms with service to match. The buffet breakfast is something of a treat – look for people rushing it down while their Landcruisers queue outside the gate to whisk them off to the office.

**Le Monde Guest House** (Map p85; ☎ 079 9614 872; lemondegh@hotmail.com; Herati Mosque St, Shahr-e Nau; r US\$60; ☎ ☎) This is a traditional Kabul home turned into a cosy, well-run guesthouse. Generous rooms are well set up, and there's a lovely garden. Given that the manager is a chef, the food is excellent.

**Naween Guesthouse** (Map p85; ☎ 079 9016 644; naweenguesthouse@yahoo.com; Ghiyassudin Wat, Kolola Pushta; r incl breakfast US\$60; ☎ ☎) Another well-run guesthouse popular with contractors and UN workers, the Naween offers a high level of comfort and security. All rooms are en suite.

**B's Place** (Map p85; ☎ 070 283968; bs\_place\_rg@yahoo.com; Street 2, Qali-e Fatullah; r US\$60) One of the first of the post-Taliban guesthouses, B's Place has six rooms with shared bathrooms, decorated in traditional Afghan style. There's a pleasant garden, and an Italian restaurant, but the place feels a little worn out by the competition from all the new hotels. A bit of a mixed bag.

**Shahr-e Nau Guesthouse** (Map p85; ☎ 070 267814; off Flower St; r incl breakfast US\$60-80) Easily spotted by its pink external walls, the Shahr-e Nau Guesthouse is a decent place. Rooms come in a variety of shapes and sizes, with up to three beds, making this a good deal if there's a few of you, but less so for solo travellers. All are en suite.

**Kabul Inn** (Map p85; ☎ 079 9359 355; kabul\_inn@hotmail.com; near Zargona High School, Qala-e Fatullah; r incl breakfast US\$64; ☎ ☎) Behind high walls on the main road, this Tajik-run place is bright, modern and clean. Rooms have satellite TV and bathrooms, all kept spotless. Even the grass on the lawn is clipped to within an inch of its life. Very good value, although the restaurant food is a little dull.

**Kabul Lodge** (Map p85; ☎ 079 9423 562/070 282643; kabulodge@yahoo.com; Passport Lane, off Interior Ministry Rd; r incl breakfast US\$75; ☎ ☎) A well-established guesthouse, the Kabul Lodge is impeccably run with helpful and efficient management. Rooms are large (with en

## MOSS

The UN maintains a list of the most secure guesthouses and hotels in Kabul that fit within its strict Minimal Operation Security Standards (MOSS). At the time of going to press, MOSS-compliant accommodation in Kabul included Assa 2 and Assa 3 Guesthouses, Naween Guesthouse, Park Palace, Maple Leaf Inn, Safi Landmark Hotel, Kabul Serena Hotel and Heetal Heritage Hotel.

suite) and there's a great restaurant, open to non-guests from 6pm.

## Top End

**Heetal Heritage Hotel** (Map p85; ☎ 079 9159 697; heetalkabul@yahoo.com; Street 14, Wazir Akbar Khan; s/d from US\$85/89; ☎ ☎) At the edge of Wazir Akbar Khan, and in the lee of Bibi Mahru Hill, the Heetal gets cleaner air than many places in the city. Perhaps that's why it flags itself as Kabul's first eco-friendly boutique hotel. No one could venture another reason when we asked. It's nicely laid out though, in a decent approximation of a caravan-serai. Rooms could be bigger, but there's a good restaurant serving everything from Tex-Mex to Indian and a weekly film night to keep you entertained. Discounts are frequently available.

**Maple Leaf Inn** (Map p85; ☎ 079 9321 401/070 203412; mapleleafinnkabul@yahoo.ca; Street 3, left off Charahi Haji Yaqub; r US\$80; ☎ ☎ ☎) Formerly called Ottawa Resorts, the motto here is 'blending serenity and efficiency'. Management is certainly efficient, while rooms match the standard of a business-class hotel anywhere you might think of. A popular venue for business breakfasts and lunches, people-spot for the movers and shakers here. Stays over a month bring the price down to US\$70 a day.

**Gandamak Lodge** (Map p85; ☎ 070 276937/079 9569 904; www.gandamaklodge.co.uk; next to UNHCR, Charahi Sherpur; US\$90-\$160; ☎ ☎) A perennially popular option with visiting media, the Gandamak Lodge is run by Peter Jouvenal, the acclaimed cameraman and Afghan expert. Now in larger premises with a nice garden, rooms are comfy and tastefully decorated in colonial fashion. The restaurant is excellent, and worth visiting for the full English cooked breakfast (US\$12)

alone, plus there's the Hare & Hounds pub in the cellar. At the entrance there's a simple memorial to peace activist-aid worker Marla Ruzicka.

**Intercontinental Hotel** (Map p80; ☎ 020 2201 320; reservations@intercontinentalkabul.com; Bagh-e Bala, Karte Parwan; s/d from US\$90/100; 🏠 🚗) This venerable institution was Afghanistan's first international luxury hotel. It's a 20-minute drive from the centre of town if the traffic allows, but the hilltop location gives great views of Kabul. The recent refit has lifted the rooms considerably. ATO and Ariana have offices here. There's also a gym, much needed after sampling the fare of the three restaurants. The pool sometimes has water, but don't bother looking for the bikini-clad swimmers still sunning themselves in the old 1970s adverts.

**Kabul Serena Hotel** (Map p93; ☎ 079 9654 000; www.serenahotels.com; Jad-e Froshgah; s/d US\$120/140; 🏠 🚗) Formerly the Kabul Hotel, the Serena is now owned by the Aga Khan and has undergone a massive renovation to transform it into Kabul's swankiest hotel by some stretch. The public areas are all light and space, while rooms have all mod-cons and a sprinkling of traditional Afghan decor. Security on the door is unsurprisingly strict, while the pastry shop's brunch (p101) was the place to be when we dropped in. As we went to press, they'd just cut the ribbon on the hotel spa.

**Golden Star Hotel** (Map p85; ☎ 075 2004 787; goldenstar\_hotel@yahoo.com; Charahi Haji Yaqub; s/d US\$100/140, ste US\$200; 🏠 🚗) One of Kabul's newest hotels, this literally towers above all others from its vantage point attached to the Kabul Business Centre. Rooms are exceedingly comfortable and well-appointed with all facilities. The deluxe suites even come with their own sauna, surely a first for Afghanistan. The Khosha restaurant and bar (opposite) sits on the top floor, overlooking Shahr-e Nau. Generous discounts can bring this easily into the midrange bracket.

**Safi Landmark Hotel** (Map p85; ☎ 020 2203 131; safilandmarkhotel@yahoo.com; Charahi Ansari; s/d US\$200/250; 🏠) You can't miss the Safi, part of the Kabul City Centre tower block in bright green glass. The lobby speaks of understated service and a glass elevator whisks you to your room, many of which overlook the shopping mall. Everything is laid on, but for the money the rooms are a bit small and

cramped. A 50% winter discount makes things better value, although at that time you'll miss out on the rooftop coffee shop.

## EATING

Kabul has the best range of restaurants in the country by some degree, with everything on offer from traditional Afghan meals to Thai and Croatian food. Many restaurants aimed primarily at the expat community open and close on a regular basis so we can't hope to be comprehensive – check *Afghan Scene* magazine or the *What's On in Kabul* newsletter for the latest developments. In addition, many of the guesthouses and hotels listed above have attached restaurants worth checking out.

Restaurants serving alcohol are noted in text, but see the Drinking section on p101 for possible legal complications.

## Restaurants

### AFGHAN

**Herat** (Map p85; Cinema Zainab Rd, Shahr-e Nau; meals 60-150Afg; ☎ 10am-10pm) A really great Afghan place which positively bursts at lunchtimes, as half of Kabul appears to eat here. The *mantu* (steamed meat dumplings) will set you back 80Afg, but save some room for the sticky sweets at the end with your tea.

**Kulba Afghan** (Map p85; ☎ 079 9210 143; Muslim St, Shahr-e Nau; mains from 200Afg; ☎ 10am-10pm) This restaurant is almost two in one, as it sits on the third floor above the also popular Rose Restaurant. What makes this more of a draw is the live Afghan music from 6pm to 10pm, and booths with cushions to tuck yourself into. Stuff yourself with the huge Kulba special (300Afg) which has a bit of everything – *pulao*, kebabs, *mantu*, chips, *qorma* (stewed vegetables), plus salad, yogurt and a soft drink.

**Sufi 2** (Map p85; ☎ 070 210651; Muslim St, Shahr-e Nau; dishes from US\$4; ☎ 10am-10pm) A sister branch to the original Sufi, this was just opening during research. With the decor and service borrowed from its sibling, lunch is a big thing here, with lots of delicious dishes like pumpkin *boloni* (stuffed pancakes), *samosas* and some great sweets like *gosh-e fil* (elephant's ear) pastries.

**Sufi** (Map p80; ☎ 070 210651; near Aryub Cinema, Bagh-e Bala, Karte Parwan; meals US\$5-11; ☎ 11am-10pm) Sufi is a little way out of town, nestled beneath the Intercontinental Hotel, but it's

worth the trip. Beautifully decorated with prints and fabrics, guests eat Afghan style, seated on cushions and carpets around low tables (though there are some tables and chairs too). There's a wide variety of Afghan dishes, nicely served up – we particularly enjoyed the *kofte chala* (minced kebabs with dried fruit and saffron).

**Khosha** (Map p85; ☎ 079 9888 999; in Golden Star Hotel, Charahi Haji Yaqub; dishes from US\$6; ☎ 11am–2.30pm, 6–11pm) This place was freshly minted when we visited and looked a treat. The rooftop setting gives great views over Kabul, while the interior is decorated with Kuchi textiles. As well as Afghan favourites, there are some good vegetable dishes normally found only in the home, like *banjan borani* (aubergine with tomatoes and yogurt), plus a great lamb *qorma* with chickpeas.

## ASIAN

Alcohol is served at all the restaurants following.

**Delhi Darbar** (Map p85; ☎ 079 9324 899; Cinema Zainab Rd; mains from US\$5; ☎ 10am–10pm) A popular choice for Indian food, and successful enough to create a mini-franchise, with branches in Mazar-e Sharif (p153) and even Tajikistan. The focus is on north Indian cuisine, plus some fiery curries and lots of vegetarian options. The one-dish-fits-all *thalis* remain a prize attraction, washed down with a cold lager.

**Samarqand** (Map p85; ☎ 079 9234 646; near Panalpina, Qala-e Musa; dishes from US\$6; ☎ 10am–10pm) This relaxed restaurant was one of the most popular in town when we dropped in, serving a mix of Central Asian food – beautifully flavoured rice and meat options – and international dishes. The regular theme nights liven things up, with Chinese food on Friday, and salsa dancing on Wednesday and Saturday.

**Jaisalmer** (Map p85; ☎ 079 9200 570; Street 1, Qala-e Fatullah; mains from US\$7; ☎ 11am–10pm) Another good Indian restaurant, with great and highly spiced tandoori dishes. It's slightly hidden away and not brilliantly signed, but don't despair: they offer a home delivery service.

**Lai Thai** (Map p85; ☎ 070 297557; Street 15, Wazir Akbar Khan; mains from US\$7; ☎ 11am–11pm) Is there an expat left in Kabul who hasn't eaten here? We doubt it. With wonderful food in a traditional Thai setting, the owner has made a

habit of opening in war-torn areas – there are sister outfits in Kosovo and East Timor. Tasty spring rolls and satay are US\$4 each.

**Baku** (Map p85; ☎ 079 9083 918; Lane 5, Street 15, Wazir Akbar Khan; meals from US\$7; ☎ 11am–10pm) What do you eat in an Azeri restaurant? It turns out to be a mix of Afghan and Turkish food, with hearty *shashlik* (kebabs) and *plov* (*pulao*) balanced out by *dolma* (stuffed leaves) and other treats. With regular flights from Baku to Kabul, it makes sense to give this place a try.

**Silk Route** (Map p93; ☎ 079 9654 000, ext 4554; Kabul Serena Hotel, Jad-e Froshgah; meals from US\$8; ☎ 6–10pm) Southeast Asian food mightn't be quite what you were expecting at the Serena Hotel's flagship restaurant, but it delivers with some aplomb, with a variety of tasty Thai, Vietnamese and Indonesian dishes – however incongruous. The setting is immaculate, so dressing smartly is a good idea.

**Shamiana** (Map p85; ☎ 020 220 3131; Kabul City Centre; meals from US\$8; ☎ 7am–11pm) The Safi Landmark's rooftop restaurant tries its hand at a bit of everything Indian, Chinese and Afghan, plus a dash of Italian and anything else they can think of. It mostly works, and its plush surroundings means that you'll be dining next to some extremely rich Afghans at the next table.

**Anaar** (Map p85; ☎ 079 9567 291; Lane 3, Street 14, Wazir Akbar Khan; mains from US\$8; ☎ 11am–10pm) Recently relocated to new premises, Anaar remains one of Kabul's lovelier restaurants. There's a wide selection of Thai, Indian and Chinese dishes with vegetarians particularly well-catered for. Thankfully, the new premises still feature a lantern-hung garden for al fresco dining, otherwise withdraw to the cosy interior, decorated with traditional Afghan crafts.

**Golden Key Seafood** (Map p80; ☎ 079 9002 800; Street 10, Wazir Akbar Khan; meals from US\$8; ☎ 10am–9pm) Of the Chinese restaurants, this is our favourite, despite the old adage of never eating seafood in a land-locked country. Flown in from Dubai, the fish and shellfish (and meat dishes) are actually excellent, and come with as many noodle and rice options as you could wish for.

## MIDDLE EASTERN

**Taverna du Liban** (Map p85; ☎ 070 210651; Lane 3, Street 14, Wazir Akbar Khan; mezze from US\$3, mains from US\$8; ☎ 11am–10pm) Several Lebanese restaurants

have come and gone in Kabul; this one has stayed the course. Tables are easily laden with mezze like *houmous*, *tabouleh* and Lebanese salad, making it easy to fill up before hitting the grill for your main. At the end of your meal, you can relax by smoking a *shisha*, perfect in the garden in the warmer months.

**Shandiz** (Map p80; ☎ 07079 9342 928; Street 10, Wazir Akbar Khan; meals from US\$4; ☎ 10am-9pm) Opposite the domestic Ariana office, Shandiz serves Iranian food in pleasant surrounds. The *chelo morgh* (chicken and rice with berries) is as good as in any Persian restaurant.

**Haji Baba** (Map p85; Charahi Torabaz Khan, Shahr-e Nau; meals from US\$7; ☎ 11am-9pm) Run by a genial Afghan, the food here bridges the gap between Persian and Herati food. The surroundings are brisk and simple, not that the many locals passing through seem to mind. They're here for bowls of thick chicken *shorwa* (soup) and plates of moist kebabs, king of which is *maheecha*, a sublime oven-baked leg of lamb. Be sure to leave room for dessert.

## WESTERN

**Popolano** (Map p85; ☎ 070 288116; Charahi Ansari; meals from US\$5; ☎ 9am-10pm) Popolano offered Kabul's first post-Taliban pizza, and is still going strong. The fickle expat dining scene means it hasn't been trendy for several years and it gets a correspondingly decent Afghan crowd, but we still like its strong blend of pizza and pasta, served in something approaching a bistro.

**La Cantina** (Map p85; ☎ 079 8271 915; off Butcher St, Shahr-e Nau; dishes from 330Afg; ☎ 11.30am-3pm, 6pm-late Tue-Sun, closed winter) There's a full range of Tex-Mex food on offer here, with great plates of nachos, burritos and bowls of chilli – tick off your choices on the menu sheet and present it to the waiter to order. Dining is al fresco, with the traditional Afghan courtyard garden pressed into service as a half-decent pueblo substitute (hence the dining season is restricted to the warmer months). Alcohol is served.

**Le Bistro** (Map p85; ☎ 079 9598 852; off Chicken St; mains US\$5-12; ☎ 8am-10pm) In a pleasant Kabuli house, this French restaurant has its own bakery attached, making the continental breakfast (US\$10) a treat of bread, pastry and croissants. Evening meals are good, even if the servings are a little on the small side. Carpets and paintings festoon

the walls, and there are regular art shows and sales on site.

**Vila Velebita** (Map p85; ☎ 079 9160 368; Street 10, Wazir Akbar Khan; pizzas from US\$8, mains from US\$12; ☎ 10am-10pm) The name of this restaurant seems to confound many Afghans, but it's actually named for a famous Croatian nationalist song. The quality of the food is high, with wood-oven pizzas, and a mix of pasta, steak and seafood, but the price tag is equally steep, especially if you throw in a bottle of Croatian wine.

**Red Hot Sizzlin'** (Map p80; ☎ 079 9838 646; ARC Yuksel Camp, Old Microrayon; meals from US\$9; ☎ 11am-9pm) Slightly out of the way, this restaurant is the place to go if you are after a steak, American-style. It's all Tex-Mex here, with juicy T-bones, piles of fries and a cold one to wash it all down.

**Carlitos** (Map p85; ☎ 079 9159 697; Heetal Hotel, Street 15, Wazir Akbar Khan; buffet US\$12; ☎ 10am-10pm) Carlitos touts itself as Kabul's best Mexican restaurant, and not happy with that crown, it then goes on to attempt Lebanese, Indian and anything else it can think of. It's at its best in the summer, when the Thursday and Friday buffet and barbeque comes into play. With a bar attached, it's deservedly popular.

**Café Zarnegar** (Map p93; ☎ 079 9654 000, ext 4553; Kabul Serena Hotel, Jad-e Froshgah; brunch US\$31; ☎ 6.30am-10pm) If you're in need of a splurge, come here from 11am for Friday brunch. There's a huge buffet with everything from tremendous salads and burgers through to sushi (yes, sushi), plus some Afghan dishes to remind you what country you're in if the surrounding glitz makes you forget.

## Quick Eats

Any chaikhana you visit will be able to serve you up *pulao* or a plate of kebabs for less than 80Afg. There are plenty of good meat and chicken kebab-style places between Shahr-e Nau Park and Charahi Haji Yaqub, interspersed with ice cream and juice bars. More fun still is to explore the mobile street food stalls that spring up on busy market streets – there are good clusters on the western edge of Shahr-e Nau Park, and in the markets around Pul-e Khishti bridge. For less than 50Afg you can fill up on a pile of *bolani*, samosas and bowls of *shor nakhod* (chickpeas with mint).

**Serena Pastry Shop** (Map p93; ☎ 079 9654 000, ext 4560; Kabul Serena Hotel, Jad-e Froshgah; ☎ 7am-10pm) All the delicious pastries you could ever want are here, in plush and polished surroundings. If your great aunt ever comes to Kabul, bring her here.

**French Bakery** (Map p85; Jad-e Torabaz Khan; cakes from 25Afg) A tiny shop opposite the Kabul Bank, this is a great place for a mid-morning bite, with some heavenly banana cakes and brownies. They're a little dry by the end of the day; we're not sure if this is a product of the genuine 'Frenchised' baking process advertised.

**Chief Burger** (Map p85; Cinema Zainab Rd, opposite Shahr-e Nau Park; meals from 80Afg; ☎ 9am-9pm) Western fast food, Afghan-style. This place is heaving at lunchtime, with local workers and students (there's a 'family lounge' for women). There are burgers, pizzas and a great tandoori chicken, served on nan with fries. Quick, tasty and filling.

**Flower Street Café** (Map p80; ☎ 070 293124; Street 7, Qala-e Fatullah; snacks from US\$4; ☎ 8am-5pm) The name is momentarily confusing, as this café is nowhere near Flower St. It's worth finding though, as it does some great sandwiches and burgers served in a flowery garden, with cake for afters. Alternatively they'll deliver your lunch to your door, but that means you'll miss out on the great smoothies and cappuccinos.

**Everest Pizza** (Map p80; ☎ 079 9317 979; Street 13 Wazir Akbar Khan; pizzas from US\$5; ☎ 9am-9pm) There's some argument about the best pizza in Kabul, but this place consistently turns out the goods. Tasty sauce, a good variety of toppings and the all important takeaway/home delivery option.

## Markets & Self-Catering

For fresh produce, the best place to go is the Mandayi Market around Pul-e Khishti mosque (Map p93) – either side of the river you'll find endless stalls selling fruit, vegetables, bread and even wheelbarrows full of cows' hooves. Around Shahr-e Nau, you're more restricted to the always-moving handcarts, piled high with fruit and veg, but there are plenty of corner shops for dried goods.

**Flower Street** (Map p85) Where the souvenir shops of Chicken St end, the grocery stores of Flower St begin, piled high with everything you might need from cornflakes to

maple syrup. Interspersed with these there are some lovely bakeries, places selling pirated DVDs, and the flower shops that give the street its name – most likely piling the petals on to highly-decorated wedding cars.

**Chelsea Supermarket** (Map p85; Jad-e Torabaz Khan) The biggest (and dare we say most expensive?) supermarket selling imported food and toiletries in Kabul. It's handy though, and has just installed an ATM. Who can argue with its proud motto over the door: 'Be happy all the time'?

**Supreme PX** (Jalalabad Rd, ☎ 8.30am-5pm) The best established of the military PX stores, every expat winds up here from time to time. There is a huge range of imported goods and food, hidden behind the most extreme security you have ever seen at a supermarket.

## DRINKING Bars

The availability of alcohol is a perennial topic of discussion in Kabul. During research it was officially 'banned', leading to its disappearance from the PX stores, and a price hike for all the places serving it. The authorities seemed happy enough with this clampdown, but be aware that changing domestic politics could quickly lead to the bars and restaurants we've listed here running very dry.

**L'Atmosphere** (Map p85; ☎ 079 9300 264; Street 4, Qala-e Fatullah; ☎ 10am-late; ☎ ) It's a restaurant, but not so many people come to 'Latmo' for the food. Especially in the summer when the pool is full, this is a bar pure and simple, and the most popular expat joint in town. On Thursday nights you could be forgiven for thinking you're back at the university bar, as the place fills up with the young and beautiful (and single) side of the aid worker scene. It's certainly fun, but we're not sure if it's Afghanistan at all, and it'll leave your head spinning in more ways than one.

**Hare & Hounds** (Map p85; in the Gandamak Lodge, Charahi Sherpur; ☎ 6pm-late) This bar gives you a geographic jolt in a completely different way: an English pub shipped lock, stock and barrel to Kabul, all the way down to the beer mats and dart board. It's as cosy as you'd hope; if it had real ale on tap, we'd be in heaven.



**Deutscher Hof** (Map p85; ☎ 079 9322 582; Street 3, Qala-e Fatullah; ☎ 11am-11pm) Doubling up as a German restaurant and catering college, the high walls here hide steins of Bavarian lager, and regular events like Kabul's Oktoberfest.

**Mustafa Hotel** (Map p85; Charahi Sadarat; ☎ 6pm-late) Made notorious by the company it's kept in the past, you can almost count the journalists who haven't written a piece on the Mustafa bar on one hand. At it's best, it's a funky mix of Rick's Bar in *Casablanca* with the alien cantina in *Star Wars*, populated by security contractors, backpackers and other unusual types.

## Cafés

There's a chaikhana on just about every corner in Kabul if all you're after is a pot of tea – yours for 20Afg with a blaring Bollywood video thrown in for free. Our favourites are those along Jad-e Maiwand and Mohammed Jan Khan Wat, where you can grab a first-floor window seat and watch the world go by. Alternatively, the juice bars around Shahr-e Nau Park are great places to refuel with banana, carrot and mango juices and more, for less than 50Afg.

**Chaila** (Map p80; Karte Se; coffee from 50Afg, milkshakes from 100Afg; ☎ 8:30am-6pm Sat-Tue, 8:30am-8pm Wed-Thu, noon-6pm Fri) Ever popular with the large number of expats who live in west Kabul, Chaila is a joint Afghan-American enterprise. They serve brick-oven pizzas and quiche, as well as sandwiches and home-made ice cream, but they're best known for their milkshakes and superb coffee – the cappuccinos and espressos are simply fantastic. It's all tastefully decorated, and they have wi-fi and cable TV to boot.

**Cabul Coffee House** (Map p85; ☎ 070 293124; Street 7, Qala-e Fatullah; juices/coffee from 100Afg; ☎ 8am-5pm) With funky paintings on the wall and some mellow jazz on the stereo, this is a great addition to the Kabul scene. As befits its name, the coffee is great, as are the juices. Grab a paper or something from the bookswap and chill out in the garden. The menu has sandwiches (from 300Afg), burgers and the like.

## ENTERTAINMENT

### Music

Most live music in Kabul is played at weddings. Should you get an invitation, they can be brilliant affairs. Several of the cultural

centres (see p84) host concerts. The most notable one is the **Foundation for Culture & Civil Society** (FCCS; Map p93; ☎ 070 292322; www.afghanfccs.org; opposite National Archive, Salang Wat), which holds regular open-air concerts of traditional Afghan music during the warmer months, and exhibitions by local artists.

## Sport

Kabul's sporting options tend to be ad hoc, with the most popular pursuits being kite-fighting (p58) and pigeon-flying (p90). On early Friday mornings impromptu gatherings of men appear to gamble on partridge and dog fights.

*Afghan Scene* and *What's On in Kabul* regularly contain adverts for gyms and expat sporting get-togethers. A slightly out-of-town alternative is a round at Kabul Golf Course (p109).

**Ghazi Stadium** (Map p80; Mohammed Jan Khan Wat; foreigner 250Afg) Kabul's main stadium hosts football matches most Friday afternoons. In the winter months and at Nauroz there are occasional *buzkashi* matches.

## Cinema

The Goethe-Institute (p84) has regular film showings, and the Maple Leaf Inn (p97) shows movies in its private theatre on Fridays.

**Aina Media Centre** (Map p85; ☎ 070 224983; Shah Mahmud Wat) Weekly outdoor films showing during the summer months.

**Shahr-e Nau Cinema** (Map p85; Shahr-e Nau Park) Afghanistan's first cinema, almost exclusively Bollywood (and male audience).

## SHOPPING

Kabul's shopping scene has seen some ups and downs, from the destruction of its covered bazaar in 1842 and Jad-e Maiwand in the 1990s, to the glitzy glass mall of the new Kabul City Centre. In the 1960s there was even a branch of the British high street icon Marks & Spencer.

**Chicken Street** (Map p85; Shahr-e Nau) This famed street has been a focus for Afghanistan's tourists since the days of the Hippy Trail. All kinds of handicrafts are available here, from jewellery to carpets, 'antique' muskets to lapis lazuli. Good times ebb and flow with the number of international workers in the city (in Taliban-era Kabul, shop owners once chased us down the

street, begging to open their shops for us), but starting prices are always high, so don't be afraid to haggle.

**Afghan Gallery** (Map p80; ☎ 079 9712 442; afghan\_gallery@afhangallery.com.af; Sarakh-e Kolola Pushta) This gallery sells well-made handicrafts, including embroidery, pottery and jewellery. There is also a wide selection of carpets woven to traditional designs, knotted by a local women's carpet cooperative.

**Zardozi** (Map p80; ☎ 070 287963; opposite Moulavi Abdul Mateen Mosque, near old British Embassy, Karte Parwan) Formerly the DACAAR Sewing Centre, Zardozi is an income-generating project working with female refugees and traditional artisans. The showroom has some lovely embroidery including clothes, and some mini-burqas just the right size to slip over a bottle of booze.

**Tarsian & Binkley** (Map p85; ☎ 070 223286; www.tarsian.com; Muslim St; ☎ by appointment) Afghan women's fashion doesn't begin and end with the burqa. Tarsian & Binkley has chic women's clothes immaculately cut and sewn by a team of over 50 Afghan women and run by an Afghan-American designer – a business venture that scooped it a Global Social Venture prize to boot.

**PARSA** (☎ 070 288233; www.parsa-afghanistan.org; Paiko-e Naswar, Karte Ariana) A shop run by the NGO PARSA as an income-generating project for Afghan women, with plenty of tempting goodies, like scarves, purses covered with delicate needlework and other pocket-sized trinkets.

**Nomad Carpet Gallery** (Map p85; ☎ 079 9328 632; near Unica, Charahi Ansari) Chicken St doesn't have a monopoly on Kabul's carpet market. Nomad has a wide selection of rugs, and has taken the innovative step of commissioning modern designs along with the traditional, to great effect.

**Zarif & Royah** (Map p85; ☎ 070 195677; www.zarif-royah.com; Lane 3 off Butcher St, Shahr-e Nau; ☎ call ahead) Kabul's other fashion house (along with Tarsian & Binkley), Zarif & Royah recently hosted Kabul's first fashion show. Elegantly cut women's clothes in traditional Afghan fabrics wouldn't look out of place in Milan or Paris.

**Afghan Handicrafts Centre** (Map p85; Interior Ministry Rd) A government-run set of units and shops, selling everything from carpets to woodwork and jewellery. There's less scope to haggle, but you can sometimes get to see craftsmen at their trade.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

Kabul is the main gateway to Afghanistan, and has the country's only international airport (Map p80; ☎ 020 2300 016; Great Massoud Rd). For more information on international flight connections, see p212. For details of connections served by humanitarian flight services, see p212.

Ariana has daily connections to Herat (3200Afg, one hour), as well as three times a week to Mazar-e Sharif (2500Afg, 30 minutes), Faizabad (2500Afg, one hour) and Kandahar (2200Afg, 30 minutes). In theory there are also flights on at least a weekly basis to Shiberghan, Kunduz and Maimana, but Ariana couldn't vouch for these when asked.

Kam Air flies daily to Herat (3250Afg, one hour), and Mazar-e Sharif (2500Afg, 30 minutes). Services to Kandahar and Faizabad were being mooted as we went to press. As with all domestic flights in Afghanistan, schedules can be extremely flexible.

## Air

### AIRLINE OFFICES

**Air Arabia** (Map p85; ☎ 079 9700 095; www.airarabia.com; Charahi Ansari)

**Ariana Afghan Airlines** (Map p85; ☎ 020 2100 271, domestic flights 020 2301 339; www.flyariana.com; Street 10, Wazir Akbar Khan)

**Azerbaijan Airlines** (Map p85; ☎ 070 296914; Charahi Ansari)

**ICRC Air Operations** (International Committee of the Red Cross; ☎ 070 285948; kabul.kab@icrc.org; Charahi Haji Yaqub)

**Indian Airlines** (Map p85; ☎ 079 9308 303; www.indian-airlines.nic.in; Interior Ministry Rd) Inside Anaar travel agent.

**Iran Asseman Airlines** (Map p85; ☎ 079 9324 006; www.iaa.ir; Street 10, Wazir Akbar Khan)

**Kam Air** (Map p85; ☎ 020 2301 753; www.flykamair.com, Kabul Business Centre, Shahr-e Nau)

**Pactec** (☎ 070 282679/079 9300 837; bookingkbl@pactec.net; Street 15, Right Lane 1, House 12, Wazir Akbar Khan)

**PIA** (Map p85; ☎ 020 2203500; www.piac.com.pk; btwn Streets 10 & 15, Wazir Akbar Khan)

**UNHAS** (United Nations Humanitarian Air Service; ☎ 070 284070/282559; kabul.unhas@wfp.org; WFP Compound, btwn Charahi Zambak & Charahi Ariana, Shahr-e Nau) UNHAS uses the UNAMA terminal at Kabul airport for all its domestic flights plus the Islamabad and Dushanbe flights. Kabul-Dubai flights depart from the main international terminal.

## Bus & Minibus

Several terminals serve Kabul, in reality little more than massed ranks of vehicles with drivers shouting out the destinations. There are no timetables – vehicles depart as soon as they're full. If you do have to wait, there's always somewhere to get tea or juice and a plate of kebabs.

Minibuses to Jalalabad (200Afg, three hours) and the Pakistan border at Torkham (300Afg, 4½ hours) leave Begrami Motor Park on the outskirts of Kabul on the Jalalabad Rd (150Afg by taxi from Shahr-e Nau). A few vehicles also leave early just after dawn from Pul-e Mahmoud Khan, close to the Id Gah Mosque, but note that all transport coming to Kabul from the east terminates at Begrami, and isn't allowed into central Kabul for security reasons. The fastest way to get to the border is to hire a taxi outright for 2500Afg.

Transport heading north through the Salang Tunnel departs from Serai Shomali Transport Depot (Map p80), a 20-minute taxi ride to the Khair Khana district on the edge of Kabul. Minibuses from here travel to Mazar-e Sharif (500Afg, eight hours), Pul-e Khumri (200Afg, four hours), Samangan (300Afg, five hours), Kunduz (400Afg, 10 hours), and Faizabad (800Afg, 1½ days). Serai Shomali is also the place for more local transport to Istalif (30Afg, 1½ hours), Paghman (30Afg, 30 minutes) and Charikar (40Afg, 30 minutes).

To travel to Bamiyan, catch a minibus from Kote Sangi (sometimes called Pul-e Socta) in west Kabul (400Afg, nine to 11 hours). Transport from here usually takes the southern route through the Hajigak and Unai Passes – see p114 for security information before considering this route. At the time of writing the northern route via Shibar was preferred for security reasons. This may mean hiring a vehicle outright, or paying a supplement to the driver to use the alternate route.

Kote Sangi is also the terminal for minibuses south to Ghazni, Kandahar and on to Herat, but this road is extremely dangerous for foreigners and we strongly advise against it.

Prices and times given here are for 16-seater HiAce minibuses. Smaller TownAces fill up (and leave) quicker, and are slightly more expensive. Faster shared taxis also de-

part from the same terminals, and cost up to a third more. It's not possible to arrange seats in advance. Long distance transport can start leaving from 5am or before, so arrive early.

## GETTING AROUND

While Taliban-era Kabul was largely a city of bicycles, traffic jams are an unwelcome side effect of progress. Getting around can be a nightmare at any time of day, with frequent road closures for unexpected security measures. Travel between Shahr-e Nau, Wazir Akbar Khan and the airport can be notably tiresome due to the large numbers of concrete roadblocks outside embassies that turn the roads into obstacle courses.

## To/From the Airport

A taxi between the airport and the centre of Kabul should cost 200Afg, a 20-minute trip in good traffic (but allow for longer). Security at the airport is extremely tight. Access is divided into three zones. Zone A, immediately outside the airport doors, is reserved for VIPs and anyone lingering here will be swiftly moved on. Zone B, 50m to the right when facing the airport entrance, is for accredited cars, while Zone 3 just beyond this is for taxis and everyone else. All vehicles are subject to a security check on arrival and all luggage is searched, so factor in time for this.

## Car

A couple of companies offer secure radio-controlled taxi services in Kabul, aimed at the expat community. Both operate 24-hour services, and also rent cars and 4WDs with drivers for short and long-term hire.

**Afghan Logistics & Tours** (☎ 079 9391 462/070 479435; [www.afghanlogisticstours.com](http://www.afghanlogisticstours.com); midnight-6pm US\$7, 6pm-midnight US\$5, full-day within/outside Kabul US\$40/80, airport transfer US\$20)

**Safe Trip Kabul** (☎ 079 9041 130; [www.safetripkabul.com](http://www.safetripkabul.com); according to time of day US\$6-13, full-day within/outside Kabul US\$80/90, airport transfer US\$25)

## Local Transport

Old buses operated by Afghan Millie Bus trundle the routes across Kabul, but they are slow with standing room only. Destinations aren't marked, so shout out where you want to go when the bus stops. If you're not

in a rush, fares cost around 3Afg. A similar network of minibuses also criss-cross the city, usually stopping to pick up passengers at roundabouts and major junctions. Look for the vehicles with a young lad hanging out of the door barking out the destination.

There are over 40,000 registered yellow taxis in Kabul, forming the bulk of the city's traffic. Shared taxis run the main roads, linking the districts. If you flag one down you'll need to know the nearest landmark

or major junction to your destination. Most taxi drivers assume that a foreigner will want to hire the whole vehicle, so make this clear when you get in. Shared taxis have a minimum fare of 20Afg.

Finding an empty taxi to hire can sometimes be a challenge, though they'll often veer towards a walking foreigner. Drivers almost always ask for 100Afg for a fare, although short hops should give you change from 70Afg. Women should be wary of taking taxis alone.